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AUTHOR	Collins, Lyle; Just, Anne
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ABSTRACT

This article tells the vocational education success story of the Southern California Regional Occupational Center (SCROC). The success of the program results in part from the fact that it is not a high school in itself, but a program that brings together youth from various locales and mixes them with adults taken from the working population in the South Bay area. The atmosphere of cooperation is intended to reflect real life settings. Both students and teachers actively participate in and welcome opportunities for individualized teacher student interaction. There is no ability grouping at SCROC. Four ongoing programs have classes for special education students. Most of these students continue with cooperative courses, which include classroom training and paid employment. College-bound students also enroll in SCROC classes; computer skills, graphic design, and technical and computer-aided drafting have the greatest appeal. Medical and dental assisting courses are popular with premed students. In addition to high school credit and grades awarded to students, SCROC provides students with materials and services useful to obtaining employment. The curriculum is occupationally centered, with a hands-on emphasis to produce salable skills. The program has an equally strong focus on individual student placing. Currently, SCROC has 12 divisions offering 60 courses on site at the Torrance Center and 15 courses off site on local high school campuses. (NLA)

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Vocational Education: A Success Story Southern California Regional Occupational Center Among the Nation's Best

Lyle Collins
Anne Just

University of California at Berkeley

National Center for Research in Vocational Education
University of California at Berkeley
1995 University Avenue, Suite 375
Berkeley, CA 94704

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by Lyle Collins and Anne Just

Vocational Education:

A Success Story

Southern California Regional Occupational Center Among the Nation's Best

"The program has a strong focus on individual student pacing, allowing each student to progress at his or her own rate in acquiring job competencies."

No class bells ring in this school. Students are expected to take responsibility for arriving to class on time and they do. Tardiness is not a problem. Class breaks of specific length are announced by teachers and students return punctually. Yet, during the class breaks and between class sessions, students are lively but respectful of other classes which are in session.

Sound like Utopia High? Perhaps you think that such a place couldn't exist in today's system. Well, it can and does, right here in California.

The Southern California Regional Occupational Center in no way resembles your typical California high school — no sports teams or cheerleaders, no organized extracurricular activities — but exciting things are happening in Torrance, 11 miles south of the Los Angeles International Airport.

Recently, in a study conducted by the National Center for Research in Vocational Education, vocational education programs from nine exemplary schools were reported on, including the Southern California Regional Occupational Center.

A relaxed order pervades classrooms. Students are experiencing success in and enjoyment of learning, some for the first time. Teachers acclaim their good fortune to work here. They willingly spend personal time with their students; their compensation is to see students grow, develop job skills and obtain jobs. One board member says, "In a regular district you see this caring in grammar school. By high school, you've lost it. Teachers see kids only one period a day. At SCROC, you spend more time with them."

Perhaps the success of the program results in part from the fact that it is not a high school in itself, but a program

Lyle Collins and Anne Just are consultants to the National Center for Research in Vocational Education at the University of California, Berkeley.

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that brings together youth from various locales and mixes them with adults taken from the working population in the area known as the South Bay. Many SCROC high school students display a balance between youthful vitality and young adult maturity and responsibility.

The atmosphere of collegiality and cooperation is intended to reflect real life settings. It is enhanced by the teachers' roles in the classroom. They effectively combine authority figure/supervisory functions with those of mentor/colleague. Teachers circulate among the students to supervise the classroom, to answer questions and to critique performance. They readily volunteer or are on call for one-on-one student assistance. Both students and teachers actively participate in and welcome opportunities for individualized student-teacher interaction.

One teacher explained that she directs her attention to the students who try to be invisible. "Teachers do that here—nurture a talent or glow they happen to see. If they don't have it when they come in, they'll have it in a short time. A lot of personal counseling goes on," she added.

There is no ability grouping of students at the Southern California Regional Occupational Center. Students are placed in classes they request and teachers receive no information about the students' test scores, report card grades or attendance patterns. The only exception is special education students, whose records are used by administrators and faculty in planning the students' individual programs.

Four ongoing programs (hospital occupations, hotel/motel operations, horticulture and retail occupations) have classes especially for special education students. High school counselors identify special education students who would benefit from vocational training and discuss classes with them. Teachers then interview and screen prospective students for appropriateness to the training.

Once admitted, special education students are exposed to all course components and, as with all the center's students, progress at individual rates. Many of the special education students, after completing an introductory one-semester course, continue with the "cooperative" course with classroom training and paid employment if offered in the program. Most of these students, after taking either one or two courses, secure local full-time employment in the appropriate occupational field.

College-bound students also enroll in SCROC courses; the programs of greatest appeal to them include classes in computer skills, graphic design, and technical drafting and computer-aided drafting fields. Medical and dental assisting courses are popular with pre-med, college-bound students. They learn medical terminology and techniques useful in college courses and in securing relevant part-time and summer jobs.

In addition to high school credit and grades awarded to students, the Southern California Regional Occupational Center provides all students with materials and services useful to obtaining employment. First, each student leaving the center receives a Performance Profile indicating all areas of training in his/her chosen field in which competency has been achieved. Second, students receive Certificates of Proficiency when they have reached the employability level in a specific job title. Third, the center has a Job Placement Office to help both trainees and graduates locate employment opportunities.

About half of the approximately 4,000 students are from the high schools of six surrounding school districts; they drive or are bused in for three hours a day for one or two semesters. The remaining students are adults, many working in South Bay businesses and industries. The center serves a largely suburban, non-inner city, mixed racial and socio-economic population.

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Characteristics of Success

The Southern California Regional Occupational Center was one of nine successful urban schools included in a study by the National Center for Research in Vocational Education at the University of California, Berkeley to document factors contributing to their success. The study found the following 10 characteristics which may be associated with the success of these schools.

1. A safe and orderly environment conducive to teaching and learning.
2. A businesslike attitude on the part of students and teachers which creates an atmosphere of constructive energy in the school.
3. A warm and caring school climate.
4. An admissions process that makes students feel special—based on student interest in the career specialty or set of subjects, not solely on student test scores.
5. A dual mission—to prepare each student for an occupation and for college.
6. High expectations for all students to succeed accompanied by attempts to minimize grouping of students by ability.
7. A curriculum organized around an industry or a discrete set of subjects.
8. The integration of theory and practice in the courses of instruction.
9. Strong linkages with business and industry and sometimes with local institutions of higher education.
10. Leadership in the office of the principal that is at the same time inspiring, sensitive and firm.

The extended school day, from 7 a.m. to 10 p.m., is broken into four three-hour segments. Three-hour daily classes provide students with intensive opportunities to learn, study and practice the occupational skills taught. Unlike high school teachers, SCROC teachers have a two-hour block between classes to visit local businesses and industries to keep abreast of occupational changes and needs. Finally, evening and Saturday classes are most useful for those who wish to complement their academic classes with vocational classes.

The curriculum is occupationally centered, with a "hands-on" emphasis to produce saleable skills. The program has an equally strong focus on individual student pacing, allowing each student to progress at his or her own rate in acquiring job competencies. Courses are offered on an open-entry/open-exit basis to facilitate individual learning.

The Southern California Regional Occupational Center began its education and training effort in February 1968 by offering the following six programs: medical and dental assisting, major appliance repair, welding, data processing equipment operation, data entry and office occupations. In September of that year, 12 other major programs, including several automotive repair fields, electronics and machine tool, were added. In 1973, additional construction and reorganization of existing space provided facilities for five more programs: emergency medical technician, hospital occupations, graphic design, technical drafting and computer programming.

In 1982, with the concurrence of its six cooperating school districts, the center began to offer programs on area high school campuses. Thus, students unable to attend classes in Torrance may still receive vocational education at their home school sites. Currently, the Southern California Regional Occupational Center has 12 divisions offering 60 courses on-site at the Torrance Center and 15 courses off-site on local high school campuses.

The center's brochure provides the first clues to its emphasis on student maturity, responsibility, professionalism and collegiality. For example, words and phrases like "maturity," "adult," "standards," "real working conditions," "appropriate to the occupation," "job performance," "regular attendance and promptness" pepper the document. But these are not just words. They describe the ethos underlying the behavior and performance of both students and staff at the Southern California Regional Occupational Center.

This article is based on a study of the SCROC by Anne Just. The study is part of the report *Exemplary Urban Career-Oriented Secondary School Programs* (product no. 012) which is available from the National Center for Research in Vocational Education, Materials Distribution Service, 46 Horrabin Hall, Western Illinois University, Macomb, IL 61455 (1-800-637-7652).